

VZCZCXR06984

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DE RUEHAD #0995 2951113
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
P 221113Z OCT 09
FM AMEMBASSY ABU DHABI
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 3014
INFO RUCNSCO/UNESCO COLLECTIVE
RUEHDE/AMCONSUL DUBAI 8461

UNCLAS ABU DHABI 000995

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SUBJECT: UNESCO Eternalizes the Tango at Intangible Cultural Heritage Meeting in Abu Dhabi

¶1. (SBU) Summary. UNESCO's Intergovernmental Committee for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage named the first intangible cultural heritage elements at its fourth extraordinary session in Abu Dhabi September 28 to October 2. Ambassador Richard Olson attended the opening ceremony and represented the U.S. as head of its observer delegation. The Committee received a standing ovation when it announced the tango as the first element to be inscribed on the Representative List. The Committee discussed at length procedural matters and the possibility of revisiting operational directives, and also selected best practices of safeguarding programs that reflect the principles and objectives of the Intangible Cultural Heritage Convention. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) His Highness Sheikh Sultan bin Tahnoon al Nahyan, Chairman of the Abu Dhabi Authority for Culture and Heritage, opened the session on 28 September by welcoming more than 400 registered delegates, observers, and journalists who filled the meeting room to capacity. Subsequent meetings of the fourth extraordinary session were also well-attended as delegates prepared for the practical implementation of the Convention.

¶3. (SBU) Ambassador Olson attended the opening ceremony September 28, serving as the head of the U.S. observer delegation. Nearly all of the 24 Committee members and the 114 members of the General Assembly of States Parties to the Convention attended, as well as approximately 50 registered observer delegations from non-party UNESCO Member States, NGOs, and experts. The UAE's representative to the Convention, Awadh Ali Saleh Al Musabi, chaired the session. Outgoing Director-General of UNESCO Koichiro Matsura addressed the closing session.

¶4. (SBU) The Committee's discussions got off to a contentious start when the Representative of the Director-General of UNESCO Ms. Francoise Riviere used her opening remarks to both compliment the Committee's work and complain about its workload. She stated that the Committee received too many proposals to seriously evaluate them all, and that the volume of proposals was not geographically balanced -- with the great majority coming from Asia and very few from Africa or South America. She suggested that the Committee limit submissions to three per country per year. Barring this limit, she asked that member states exercise discretion in future years in order to reduce the burden on the Committee. Cherif Khaznadjar, Chairperson of the General Assembly of the States Parties to the Convention, said the Committee's workload exacerbates the geographical imbalance of submissions by preventing Committee staff from spending more time offering assistance to southern states in protecting their intangible cultural heritage.

¶5. (SBU) On September 30 and October 1, the Committee inscribed the first 88 intangible cultural heritage elements to the Representative List and the Urgent Safeguarding List. (Note: The Representative List already included 90 elements, following the incorporation of the 90 masterpieces proclaimed before the Convention entered into force. End Note.) In Abu Dhabi, the Committee added the first 76 elements to the Representative List nominated by member states in

order to enhance the visibility of the intangible cultural heritage and to promote its continued practice. The tango became the first official addition to the list.

¶6. (SBU) The Committee added 12 elements proposed by member states to the Urgent Safeguarding List. These included the traditional music of the Tsuur, a Mongolian woodwind instrument; the language and culture of the Suti, a small Catholic community in western Latvia; and the traditional Kaya forest settlements of the Mijikenda communities of coastal Kenya. The Committee determined the viability of these elements to be endangered, despite the efforts of the community or group concerned. Inscription of an element on the Urgent Safeguarding List makes the state potentially eligible for financial assistance to implement specific safeguards.

¶7. (SBU) The Committee also selected three examples of best practices of safeguarding programs that reflect the principles and objectives of the Convention. Among the best practices noted by the Committee were the Pusol school museum, integrating the study and protection of cultural heritage with formal education in Elche, Spain; and a joint project to protect the music, oral expressions, and culture of the Aymara communities of Bolivia, Chile and Peru.

OLSON